

The State of Homelessness in the United States

Homelessness is a problem that is both constantly visible and largely unaddressed. The most recent point-in-time count of the homeless population in the United States found that there were 610,042 people experiencing homelessness on a single night in January 2013. Of that number, 394,698 were in shelters, leaving 215,344 people unsheltered.¹ This marked a slight decrease from 2012, continuing a trend of decreasing homelessness since 2007. However, this decrease has not been universal. Homelessness has increased in twenty states and the since 2012, ranging from a 0.29% increase in Kentucky to a 200.73% increase in North Dakota.² Moreover, while the homeless rate has decreased nationally, a U.S. Conference of Mayors survey of 25 large and midsize metro areas found a 3% increase in overall homelessness.³ Homelessness continues to be a predominantly urban problem.

There are four essential types of shelters, as defined by the Department of Housing and Urban Development.⁴

1. **Emergency Shelters** are designed to provide basic temporary shelter for homeless persons.
2. **Transitional Housing Programs** are designed to provide supportive services to homeless people, allowing them to stay for up to 24 months. They are designed to get people into permanent housing.
3. **Safe Havens** are specialized to homeless people with severe mental illness and are limited to serving no more than 25 people.

¹ Henry, Cortes, & Morris. Page 1.

² National Alliance to End Homelessness.

³ Pearce, M. *LA Times*. "Homelessness, hunger climbing in U.S. cities, mayors' survey says."

⁴ Henry, Cortes & Morris. Page 2

4. **Permanent Supportive Housing** is specialized to homeless people with disabilities and allow their residents to stay indefinitely.

Most shelters are at or near their maximum capacity, with total shelter usage hovering between 91% and 95% in a given year between 2007 and 2013 (It was 93% in 2013). However, emergency shelters have much higher rates of usage than transitional housing programs, fluctuating between 98% (in 2012) and 103% (in 2009) of their capacity. Transitional housing programs fluctuate between 83% (in 2012 and 2008) and 89% (in 2010).⁵ The disparity in usage between emergency shelters and transitional housing programs may be attributed to the poor conditions found in some shelters, leading some people to choose the streets over the shelters. While these conditions may be tolerable for a night, they may become intolerable over the long term. Kylyssa Shay, a blogger who has both worked at homeless shelters and used their services, outlined some of the reasons why people might rather sleep outside than use a shelter.⁶ Some of these are structural, such as rigid shelter schedules that are incompatible with work hours for those who are employed. Others are systemic, such as invasive check-in processes and discrimination based on sexuality. However, some could be avoided by improving the quality of the facilities, such as the prevalence of parasites, the danger of rape or assault, the fear of contracting disease, and the difficulty of accommodating disabled people.

In order to improve the quality and quantity of shelters, personal donations are necessary to supplement government subsidization. The Department of Housing and Urban Development, which provides federal funding for local homeless shelters, has seen its budget increase in the past two years, a promising sign for a department that was forced to cut its budget by approximately 5% in 2013 due to sequestration cuts. For the 2015 fiscal year, they intend to

⁵ Henry, Cortes, & Morris. Page 65.

⁶ Shay, K. "Why Homeless People Don't Use Shelters."

devote over \$2.4 billion to homeless assistance grants, up from \$1.933 billion in 2013.⁷ While this is a promising development, it will not fully negate the overcrowding of emergency shelters and the danger of transitional housing programs. Additional funding from personal donations could increase capacity in emergency shelters and improve conditions in transitional housing programs.

⁷ U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. "Overview of FY2015 President's Budget." Page 20.